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## SATURDAY COLUMN

# Lost in the political tunnel

POLITICS is a destructive trade. One of the decisions I do not for one moment regret is making up my mind, some 30 years ago, never to seek to enter the House of Commons. Political life is destructive because it both inflates the ego and subjects it to monstrous and often quite undeserved shocks; because a man may waste the best years and energies of his life through no fault of his own but simply because he finds himself in the wrong party; and because it is more productive of *déformations professionnelles* than almost any other occupation.

How they stick out, and how one comes to recognise them instantly and loathe them, so that when one finds a successful politician who has somehow contrived to remain unscathed—a Jo Grimond, a Willie Whitelaw or a Peter Shore—he seems like a gift of providence.

Worst of all, however, politics is self-destructive. A politician may have great talents but at some critical period in his life he makes a mistake, and enters a tunnel from which, in the natural course of political events, there is no exit. If he does not recognise that mistake quickly and get out of the tunnel as fast as his political agility will carry him, he is a doomed man.

His self-righteousness and powers of conviction will carry him deeper and deeper into it; and the narrower and darker it gets, and the fewer there are prepared to follow him, the further he will penetrate and the more he will persuade himself that it is the only way, for him and his country. In the end he begins to wish for the great national cataclysm which alone can make sense of his forlorn voyage to nowhere. By this time he is a haunted man, like Lear summoning up cataracts and hurricanes; a man seeing visions, hearing voices, imagining things and re-writing recent history in his head; and, inevitably, a lonely man, avoided by those who were once his friends.

It is not difficult to list

PAUL JOHNSON on two men who highlight the destructive side to politics

examples of this phenomenon from our political history. I suppose the most spectacular case between the wars was Oswald Mosley; once he got into the Blackshirt tunnel he never got out but burrowed himself further into the mountainside for the next 40 years. Some would suggest Enoch Powell as another example, but he is not what I mean. Mr Powell is a natural loner, not a cabinet man.

He has chosen his mature role in politics with deliberation, at any rate after his first few mistakes, and I do not think he would wish it any other way. As it happens, he talks more sense than almost any other Member of Parliament.

There are, however, two egregious cases at the present time. The first is Edward Heath. His case is particularly tragic because he was an able and hard-working man who fought his way upwards from humble origins, and did the state some service at one time. But like many politicians, he was insufficiently self-critical and, worse, would not suffer criticism from those who wished him well; and so became isolated as party leader and was publicly dethroned. His reaction to this distressing event—uncomprehending rage, followed by the attribution of base motives to all concerned—was his first entry into the tunnel.

Thereafter, step by step, he has pursued his way doggedly into the mountain, looking neither to left nor right, heedless of advice, rejecting all overtures of gestures of reconciliation, to the point where they are no longer made, shedding old political followers one by one, until he is left with nothing but a courtier or two, like an elderly Stuart pretender. He has learned nothing, forgotten nothing. Or, rather he has reconstructed in his head the circumstances of his fall, so that it has now become a melodramatic fantasy.

I suppose James II got a bit like this; the French at Versailles used to say, contemptuously, "When you listen, to him, you realise why he is here and not in his own palace in London." But Heath's case is far more pitiable because everyone knows he has travelled down his dark tunnel not in pursuit of some grand principle, but out, of simple, personal pique.

Tony Wedgwood Benn, my other example, is at least above this. Indeed he is singularly free from vanity or selfishness—in so far as any politician is free from these vices—and I have always found him a sincere and likeable man. But personal tragedy nonetheless. For he made his reputation, not as a party man, still less an extremist, but as a great parliamentarian.

He defended his right to renounce his peerage and serve the public in the House of Commons with admirable pertinacity, enviable skill and, at times, heroic brilliance. What is more he won, and the law of the land was changed.

Then suddenly, after a moderately successful Ministerial career, and for reasons which to me are obscure, he entered the tunnel of the Far Left; and there is no worse tunnel than that. It was a route which Aneurin Bevan once seemed bent on taking; but he recovered his reason and retraced his steps and, though death deprived him of his political reward, he died a sensible and much honoured man.

But nothing will persuade the unfortunate Benn not to trudge further into his tunnel. Recently he even associated himself with the group of boorish MPs who want to destroy the functioning of Parliament, so that he has effectively turned his back on everything which once made him an ornament of our political system. It is sad to see men like Heath and Benn destroying themselves. What have they in common? Can it be an almost total lack of a sense of humour?